

reliquary

{rel'-uh-kwair-ee}

A reliquary is a receptacle, usually richly decorated and made of precious materials, for the safekeeping or exhibition of a relic, an object venerated for its association with a holy person, often a martyr. Relics are often credited with curative or miraculous powers and are associated with various religions throughout the world. The cult of holy relics in the Christian church had its beginnings around the 7th century AD, and reliquaries were numerous by the 10th century. The Crusades were a stimulus to the traffic in relics, many being brought back to Europe by the Crusaders for presentation to churches, monasteries, and cathedrals, where they became the goals of pilgrimages.

Reliquaries took many forms: caskets, miniature church buildings such as the Eltenberg Reliquary (c.1170; Victoria and Albert Museum, London), and figural works. Examples of the latter kind include the reliquary busts of Saint Januarius (1304-06; Naples Cathedral) and Charlemagne (1215; Aachen Cathedral). Related to these are "anatomical" reliquaries in the form of the contained relic, such as those for the arm of Saint Magnus and the leg of Saint Theodore (both 11th century; Saint Mark's Basilica, Venice). A particular flat, rectangular form called staurotheke was devised during the 11th century to contain relics of the True Cross (the one on which Christ was crucified). Small reliquaries were also made to wear as amulets. The **SAINTE-CHAPELLE** in Paris was built (1248) in the form of a reliquary to house the Crown of Thorns.

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Bibliography: Geary, Patrick A., *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (1978); Henderson, George, *Early Medieval* (1972) and *Gothic* (1967).